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RACIAL PREJUDICE

If one asks random people on the street about racism, there is a good chance that they, despite their skin color, will state that it does no longer exist in the U.S. Nowadays, even many people of color believe that racial issues are exaggerated and contrived. It reflects a difficult situation when once visible manifestations of racial discrimination mutated into institutionalized racism which is much harder to detect, especially when people refuse to see it. However, despite denying the problem, it resurfaces with new force. In particular, a wave of unrest after the notorious events in Ferguson in August of 2014 brought the problem of racial prejudice into the limelight. To start solving ramifications of many years of institutionalized racism, there is a need to examine and study the problem thoroughly and deeply. Vincent Parrillo is experienced in studying racism as a professor of sociology at Williams Paterson University in New Jersey and an author of several books on this problematic issue. He has studied both aspects of racial prejudice, namely psychological and sociological. In his article *Causes of Prejudice*, Parrillo explains that the psychology of racism includes conditioning, beliefs, and personality peculiarities. On the contrary, the sociology of racism comprises social norms and conditions of the society that promote racism. Testimonials of both whites (an interview with an ex-member of the Ku Klux Klan C. P. Ellis) and people of color (*Let's Get Real* by Mun Wah Lee) support Parrillo's theoretical work. The failure to

discuss and to begin to solve the problem of racism has caused the events in Ferguson because racial minorities still have a low status and are stereotypically attributed negative traits.

Racial prejudice is the obvious reason for the tragic death of 18-year-old Michael Brown, shot dead by a white police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014 in St. Louis County, Missouri (Buchanan et al.). That morning, Officer Wilson received a report about two black young people stealing cheap cigars in a local shop. An hour later, he saw them on the street and an altercation occurred. Brown did not have any weapons, but Officer Wilson shot him 12 times. Obviously, if Officer Wilson was not in mortal danger, he should not have shot. The psychology of prejudice can explain such a behavior because Officer Wilson has demonstrated that for him, prejudice exists on all the three levels: cognitive, emotional, and action-oriented (Parrillo 505). As a country with a long history of slavery and racism, America developed a set of negative traits attributed to black people, dangerous and criminal being among them. In the violent altercation with Brown, Officer Wilson revealed his cognitive level of prejudice treating Brown as a dangerous subject. As a result, his emotional level of prejudice was charged with fear or anger. Officer Wilson reacted to Brown's refusal to surrender vehemently by firing twelve rounds at him, which indicates the Officer's action-oriented level of prejudice (Buchanan et al.). After the unrest in the city and an investigation into the case, Officer Wilson was not indicted. It may reveal another component of racially prejudiced society called self-justification, which presupposes that people give various reasons for the negative treatment of other people. Parrillo points out one of the cases of self-justification: "[A] source of prejudice is the dominant group's assumption of an attitude of superiority over other groups" (508). The fact that the Ferguson police force was almost all white may contribute to the feeling of superiority. There are only four black officers in the Ferguson Police Department while the rest 49 officers are white (Buchanan et al.). Inasmuch

as the position of police officer is a position of force and power, it intensifies the sentiments of superiority existing among the white population.

However, personality factors are not the primary cause for prejudice. According to Parrillo, “[A] direct relationship exists between degree of conformity and degree of prejudice” (515). It means that in terms of racism, social climate and environment matter because people adopt beliefs and practices they see around. For example, when individuals live for some time in less prejudiced environments, such as the army, the level of prejudice declines. On the other hand, when people find themselves in racially charged environments, eventually they become more prejudiced against minorities. This idea is supported by C. V. Ellis’s testimonial concerning the origin of his prejudice, “The natural person for me to hate would be Black people, because my father before me was a member of the Klan” (Terkel 202). Indeed, the ideas and beliefs people pick up from their parents are fixed because it is natural for individuals to accept their parents’ choices. At the same time, prejudices can be so subtle that it is difficult to detect them. For instance, some people may believe that African-Americans are lazy and dangerous and Chinese people are cunning. Consequently, it may be difficult to convince them that it is the reason they do not have people of these races among their friends or are reluctant to do business with them.

Brown’s death started a wave of social indignation. Whereas only thirty percent of whites agree that racial prejudice caused it, almost ninety percent of the black population believe that there is a need to bring up and discuss racial issues properly (Buchanan et al.). While some people may argue whether the problem of racism truly exists in America, it is crucial to consider inherent processes and needs that one can see as a basis for racial prejudice. Parrillo reminds about important psychological mechanism, namely scapegoating: “Minorities fulfill a functional “need” as targets for displaced aggression and therefore will remain targets” (512). Personal and

social tensions have a tendency to grow. Therefore, the mechanism of repressed aggression discharge still can be scapegoating. It explains why the phenomenon of racism still exists. Another reason for racism and the reluctance of people to discuss it in the open is a conscious or subconscious feeling of guilt. In Mun Wah Lee's book, Shawn Patrick, one of the participants, shares his thoughts on the subject: "Accepting racism means also accepting that your success has come at the price of millions of people losing their rights, privileges, even lives, and not because of 'hard work'" (32). Talking about racism conflicts with people's desire to think well of themselves. It demands from them to take responsibility for the past and the present and acknowledge that discrimination has taken place.

I believe that as the problem of racial prejudice is so multidimensional, it should be tackled in all aspects simultaneously. Both the state and each citizen should treat the issue seriously and do their best not to act biasedly because of someone's skin color and ethnic origin. On the part of the authorities, steps should be made to reduce the level of institutionalized racism. For this purpose, racial minorities should be provided with the same educational and job opportunities, housing, and living conditions. Furthermore, awareness of racism should be raised and the issue of racism should be studied in every educational institution starting from school. As for each individual member, after people consider their attitudes and beliefs, they need to try to eliminate the disparaging attitudes. All these steps need much time and effort and cannot be made quickly and at least they should be started.

The events in Ferguson exposed the serious problem of prejudice that had grave consequences such as the death of Michael Brown. It showed that racial prejudice is more than just one person disliking another. It has a systemic character and is deeply ingrained into the structure of society and interactions between people. On a personal level, prejudice begins at

home when children pick up their parents' beliefs and habits. In terms of society, it is continued in social norms and social institutions. Furthermore, racism is a painful topic both for whites and people of color because there are psychological 'needs' justifying the existence of prejudice. So long as for white people it is unpleasant to think of such brutal phenomena as slavery and racism.